

Don't forget your toothbrush

Rodenstock's new managing director, Keith Carnes, has arrived hotfoot from Gillette but has more than experience of male grooming products to bring to optics, writes **Chris Bennett**

Keith Carnes, the new managing director at Rodenstock is a brave man. Not only does he have to fill the very large shoes vacated by industry stalwart Chris Hunt but he has also agreed to be interviewed on the subject just four weeks into the job.

A peek at Carnes' CV gives a hint to his laid back confidence in talking about a market so new to him. Since graduating in business studies and law from Lancaster University, the Stoke on Trent-bred Carnes has motored through a variety of roles in and around the dental, pharmacy and retail sectors.

His career started at Rank Hovis MacDougal and after a short stint at British American Tobacco he found himself at Oral B Labs. At the time, Oral B was a sleepy operation owned by CooperVision but after its acquisition by Gillette, a meteoric rise for Carnes and the brand ensued.

The Gillette years

Over the last 20 years Carnes has had command of a number of senior roles in sales, marketing and business development within Gillette and he says the contact he has had with dentists, grocers and independent pharmacies equips him well for the world of independent opticians. After the recent takeover of Gillette by Proctor & Gamble, Carnes decided to forego a more senior role in Europe to stay in England, for the sake of his children.

'I began to rethink where I wanted to be and I decided that I wanted to get into a smaller company where I could bring much of the experience and learning that I had had through being part of the one of the great companies,' he says.

But just being a bigger fish in a small pond wasn't the whole story. 'In those big companies getting change isn't always easy. Here it is very much more hands on and you can make a major difference and a major impact,' he explains.

'During those years I worked on



Keith Carnes: many best practice projects, one of those was focused on independent pharmacies to integrate the sales of Braun, Gillette, Duracell and Oral B, all owned by Gillette, which all had separate sales forces. We brought many key learnings to the sector, and I can see how, by using these learnings, we can enhance our offering to the independent optician.'

He believes change is crucial for independent practices just as it was for independent pharmacies 20 years ago.

Category management

But are the two really comparable? 'It's identical, absolutely identical, the grocers and the drug stores were getting bigger and the pharmacies were getting squeezed on every front,' he says.

'If you went back to Oral B 25 years ago it was exactly the same. We had to penetrate the dental schools, hospitals and the profession to build up the credibility of Oral B with those professionals. Only once we had done that were we then able to take Oral B onto a more commercial platform and start advertising the brand, it was the

dental recommendation that drove the retail sales.

'There are a lot of lessons to learn from Gillette. Let's just say that one of the key strengths I had within Gillette was category management. I can see some real transferable benefits of category management that can be applied to optics and retail practices.'

Category management, as Carnes is keen to explain, is taking the whole category of products and looking at the benefits for the retailer and the consumers. This is done by building up knowledge through consumer and shopper insights, data, merchandising and layout promotions using fact-based decisions. Much of this, he argues, can be applied to optics. Independent practices – just as independent pharmacists – should be looking to their suppliers for that market data and intelligence.

One of the things he notes that doesn't seem to happen in optics as well as it should is the sharing of best practices.

'There are key customers out there of ours that are world-class optical practices. We have to capture what makes them so good and so special and transfer that to other practices – like a consultancy approach,' he says.

The Star Club

Part of this could be channelled through the Star Club which rewards Rodenstock's core customers, but he is also keen to widen the message to bring others in too. There's more to Rodenstock than the club, he says.

Carnes is cautious about being specific about exactly what elements of change he might bring but gives one example from his pharmacy days:

'Taking oral care, if I went back 20 years ago there were about eight to 12 suppliers, today there are four. I suspect this will happen in optics, increasingly there could be a move towards a much smaller number of suppliers offering value-added services.'

It's a waste of energy to have too many, he says. 'Promotional calendars 20 years ago had 40 promotions running. Today that's been reduced

to just a handful because its wastes so much staff time and can lead to inefficiencies, there needs to be a move away from that.'

Just as happened with the pharmacy sector those who thrive and survive will be the ones who differentiate through service and have efficient processes. In retail that comes down to the look of the stores; from the staff training to the whole shopping experience, he says.

Looking, listening and learning

In the four short weeks since he started, Carnes has met around 70 Rodenstock customers and he believes best practice already exists within Rodenstock's customer base.

Practices like Leightons in Farnham are among the top practices in the UK or even Europe he says. The majors like Boots and Tesco go outside their own sphere to seek out best practice so they can apply it to their own businesses and it should be no different for independents. Many of his customers already do this to gain insights into other peoples' businesses and their own.

It's all about looking, listening and learning.

'One of our best customers is next door to a Specsavers and therein lies a great case study. If you get all of the elements right you can quite nicely compete with the big four,' he says.

Rodenstock is part of a massive, leading-edge technological giant, which Carnes believes its customers can draw on. 'Not everyone is fully aware of that. New product development is the lifeblood of the industry,' he says. 'This is a powerful weapon independents can harness to differentiate and create those new categories.'

He uses the example of Informance, the head up display sports eyewear showcased in Munich (See Munich report, *Optician*, February 16) of the difference new technology can bring.

The value-added ladder

'Let's go back to Gillette. Once upon a time there was no such thing as shaving gel, there was no such thing as female shaving products, or kids' electrical toothbrushes. You can actually create whole categories from nothing,' he explains.

'In optics there are opportunities to create categories that could open up within the optical business. It is down to our R&D people. If you have got the

right backing you can create categories and products and that's better for the consumers.

'It's all about getting consumers to climb the value-added ladder. What I've preached over the years is that you have got to let go of the bottom end as the NPD [new product development] comes through, that's what I see the independents moving towards.

'You have got to have leading-edge products that are refreshed on a regular basis, coupled with the customer service piece around them to make sure you are the preferred supplier,' he continues.

'Best business practice is continuity, less promotion, better training, understanding your supplier and customer base. At the moment, the mentality is often; "I am king and I have the power. If I don't like this, then I can change it". That's OK, but is that the best way to be developing your business?

'One of the foundations of Club has been to bring independents together to front up the big four. I see it as a key role of Rodenstock to bring that business intelligence to their way of doing business, whether they embrace it or not is their prerogative.' ●



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